Developing a Research Agenda

A National Heritage Areas Workshop

Following gracious opening remarks, our host, Peter Brink, actively listened, helped facilitate the discussions, and moved the enthusiastic participants through an ambitious agenda.

Welcome: November 20, 2002 Workshop

Peter Brink, Senior Vice President for Programs at the National Trust for Historic Preservation, welcomed 21 invitees to the workshop, *National Heritage Areas: Developing a Research Agenda,* held in their Washington D.C. boardroom. Brink noted that this gathering was inspired in part by the *Pocantico Conference on Research, Policy, and Historic Preservation* (May 29-30, 2001) and a subsequent meeting *From Research to Action: Shaping the Policy Environment for Preservation* (January 6-8, 2002). Both gatherings were supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts and Rockefeller Brothers Fund and included preservation practitioners, academics, foundation executives, government officials and consultants brought together to identify historic preservation research needs. The identified needs included research on the impacts of the new heritage area phenomena and documentation of how successful heritage areas actually work.

The National Trust with support from the American Planning Association and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers hosted this workshop of experts in the heritage area field to create a heritage area research agenda.

Brenda Barrett's Charge to Group

Brenda Barrett, the National Park Service's National Coordinator for Heritage Areas, identified the need to define and prioritize a research agenda for Heritage Areas. She described the workshop as a starting point to meeting five objectives. First, there is a pressing need to develop more written information on heritage areas. While the academic community has recently discovered heritage areas and interest from graduate students is particularly strong, little to date has been published. An agreed upon research agenda will help both researchers and practitioners achieve mutual goals. Second, policy makers are seeking guidance as they draft legislation and guidance material. Good data will help in developing effective policies.

From the National Park Service and National Trust: A National Heritage Areas Initiative

Third, the National Park Service needs guidance on how to partner as a way of doing business. National Heritage Areas are great examples of the partnership approach. These strategies can be applied to merging natural and cultural interests, helping National Park units look beyond their boundaries, and harnessing the energy in the non-profit and private sectors. Fourth, there is a need to measure the benefits and impacts of becoming a heritage area. This is of great interest to existing and proposed areas as well as elected officials. How does designation affect tourism and other kinds of economic development? What is the impact on stewardship and community life? Finally, the process of developing and managing heritage areas needs to be studied to assist new areas in adopting successful and effective practices in planning, administration and finances.

Elizabeth Watson: Assessing Economic and Community Impacts

Working from Peter and Brenda's groundwork, Elizabeth Watson of Chesapeake Regional Studies at Washington College, a gifted facilitator, shepherded the group through three agenda topics beginning with *Assessing Economic and Community Impacts*.

The workshop organizers provided some discussion points as food for thought before the group convened in Washington, D.C. The points were as follows:

- Evaluating the economic impacts of heritage areas is difficult on a number of levels including the size of the regions, the number of visitor attractions, the number of gateways, and relatively small investment in comparison to the overall economic activity. Several heritage areas are testing an adaptation of the Money Generation Model (MGM), a variation of the IMPLAN model that is used by National Park Service units, to assess visitor impact. What can the test areas learn? What other approaches might the areas consider?

- Effective heritage areas are based upon partnerships. Over time does this "partnership" ethic have an impact on how the region does its work? How can this be measured?

- Heritage education is an important component of most heritage plans and programs; how can its effectiveness in both teaching and improving community understanding about the past be measured?

- What other quality of life factors could be measured?

- What steps might a newly designated heritage area take to evaluate the impact of its programs and projects on an annual basis?

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Elizabeth Watson facilitated three of the four sessions, actively listening and faithfully transcribing the group's thoughts.

Angela Gernert and Suzanne Copping, served as scribes for the meeting, contributed fresh insights, and well-represented their respective universities, West Virginia University and University of Maryland

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Assessing Economic and Community Impacts:

Elizabeth Watson captured points from the discussions on flip charts. Those points augmented by notes taken by Suzanne Copping and Angela Gernert follow.

Heritage Areas:

- Must identify discernible stories and resist the discipline's demand to "separate" the economic-centered assessment from the cultural characterization. How can they measure the two together? What is important is more than economics. It is the environment and public health as well.
- Must identify indicators of sustainability. They need to know where they want to end up.
- Need research to justify and guide investment.

Heritage Area Researchers Face Data Collection Challenges

- Steve Blackner of the Northern Forest Center asked whether we will be able to craft something specific for Heritage Areas? He suggested we will need to build on baseline information as Heritage Areas come online. The Northern Forest Wealth index is an example of developing indicators that measure heritage area success. The indicators are lumped as culture, education, environment, community and economy. Steve indicated the participatory process they used to develop the indicators led to strategies and partnerships. The result is 27 indicators that will be tested over a two-year period. [http://www.northern-forest.org/techwindex.htm]
- Heritage Area researchers must not minimize the difficulties of data collection. Can we measure causation when so much is going on in heritage areas that aren't heritage area initiatives? Is causation important?
- Who decides on local indicators? Do the indicators need to be locally generated? Involving locals helps create buy in. See the Land Assessment and Site Evaluation construct used by the USDA for conversion of farmlands as an example of considering local needs.
- The ultimate audiences are the local officials who make land use decisions. If that is accepted as a given, can standard measurements be developed for all heritage areas to achieve a cross-sectional database?

Heritage Area Researchers Should Find Some Ongoing Data Collection Efforts Useful.

- The National Trust uses a small set of national Main Street program benchmarks to assess the program's impacts across time and location. The Trust began collecting standard data 20 years ago. The system allows them to measure return on investment over the long term. Buildings are stationary while people are not. People vote with their feet. There can be problems of displacement of local culture by new people and tourism. Researchers need to include ethnographic data in the baseline data collected and tracked long-term to assess whether demographics are changed by activities.

- Dennis Frenchman offered MIT's list of *elements of livability in an environment* as indicators the group might want to consider: health, access, diversity, distinctiveness, amenity, security, and influence.

- Some data collection initiatives are underway. Carrol Van West of the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area represented the Alliance of National Heritage Areas (ANHA) at the Research Agenda meeting. He reported that the ANHA is working with NPS and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers to develop a model for data gathering. The Tennessee Civil War Heritage Area is also committed to gathering data for its area. Maryland state heritage areas also have a data collection requirement.

Heritage Area Researchers Must Make Difficult Data Collection Decisions

- What should be the scale of data collected? At the community level? At the regional level? Causation is a big issue. Can we hope to model heritage area impact as causation or is it a false hope? Is identification of strong correlation all that is possible?

- Researchers must be careful of conflicting agendas (e.g. economic versus cultural values).

- Other decisions about the direction of research that need to be made: Cross-comparison of all heritage areas? Local idiosyncratic research? Advocacy versus 'objective' research? Quantitative versus qualitative? Case studies versus numbers? Measure economic development? Measure lifestyle?

- Some heritage areas are looking to rebirth, to keeping people in. Some heritage areas are looking to control sprawl, to keeping people out. What factors are impelling the heritage area movement in given areas?

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Elizabeth Watson: Assessing Impacts on Resources

Elizabeth Watson launched the group into the second of the agenda topics, *Assessing Impacts on Resources.* Using the following background information and questions prepared by the meeting organizers to get the discussions rolling, the group began the second session.

- The Alliance of National Heritage Areas has supported an internship in the NPS Heritage Areas' office to compile a summary report on the 23 national heritage areas. This work has profiled baseline information on demographics (age, population, diversity and median income figures) and nationally significant resources (areas associated with the National Park Service.) The project is currently collecting data on the number of main street programs, CLGs, state and local parks, and programs receiving Federal grants and incentives. Some executive directors of heritage areas have been surveyed on the categories of resource information they currently collect.

- What information can be feasibly and efficiently collected on a regular basis?

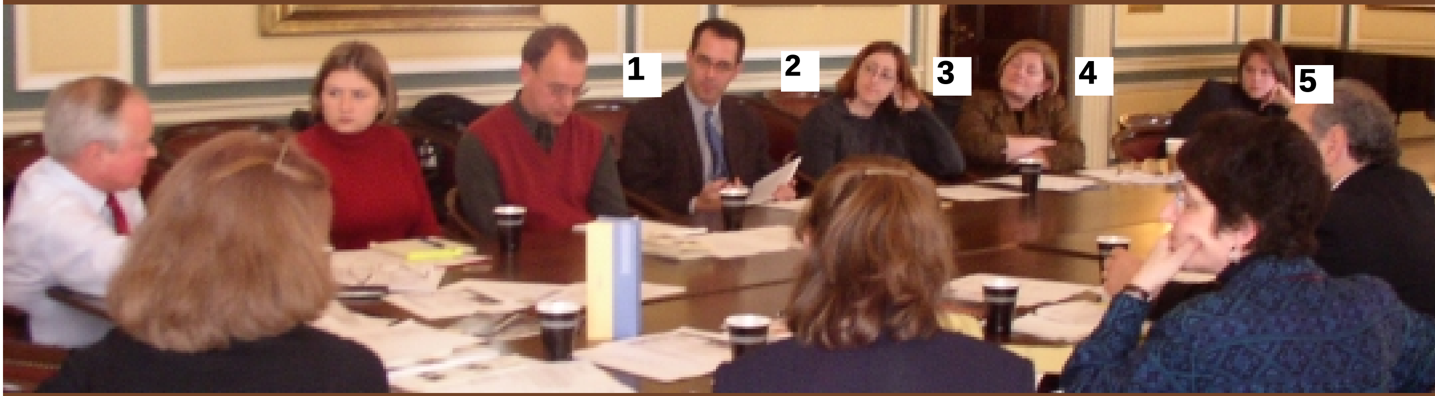
- What categories are most relevant and beneficial to the heritage areas?

- How will those involved with heritage areas most benefit from the use of this data? How can its accessibility and usefulness be maximized?

Working from these discussion points, Elizabeth Watson led the group in a discussion of how we might assess heritage area impacts on resources. Some of the salient points particularly those that were written to flip charts follow.

Those doing heritage area research:

- Should model zoning build-out; visualize alternate futures, and measure "decay rate". Researchers can use new technologies to create images of alternative land use plans and streetscapes. They may also want to use computer modeling to represent visually the 'decay rate' if current development trends continue into the future.
- Should look at many cultural impacts. For instance, in West Virginia look at coal but also the lesser known history of cultivating ginseng.
- Should assess ethnic, religious, occupational, environmental, and community impacts
- Should consider measures such as those developed as Agenda 21 by United Nations' sustainable development initiative. [http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/agenda21.htm]
- Need to figure out how to measure Heritage Areas role in public education. There has been an explosion in field based educational programs in Heritage Areas.
- Could use surveys distributed through high school classes' reunion committees to get opinions on the success of heritage area initiatives, preferred new initiatives, and assessments of the heritage area's economic health and quality-of-life High classes are useful because they include those who stayed in a heritage area and those who left.



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- Want to measure social capital, the norms and networks that enable collective action. What measures can be used? Number of nonprofits? Number of coalitions? Participation in local elections? Even if there are no easy indicators, need to identify what we want to know.
- Should be collecting language and not just economic indicators. Perhaps researchers might look to the National Endowment of the Humanities electronic encyclopedia. Also, Tennessee is creating a GIS database to track and place stories voiced by communities.

Group Raised Important Yet Unanswered Questions.

- How do we measure cultural change and cultural comfort? How do Heritage Areas promote a sense of cultural comfort?
- How do heritage areas adapt traditions and traditional industries to the 21st century and retain community identity? May want to work with traditional institutions affected by change such as unions and churches.
- How do we communicate success? Perhaps we could use before and after visuals. Perhaps, we could make use of anecdotes, for example, single business case studies or before and after testimonials.
- How do we develop strategies to respond to identified threats to loss of traditional culture? Apprenticeships were noted as one possibility.

Impacts of Heritage Areas are Far Reaching.

- A heritage area is a great way to bring people in rural areas together and to bring help to rural places; it provides a commonality even in polarized situations.
- An area's heritage is an entree into local planning. Heritage areas should use cutting-edge technologies and take the lead in using them to tell heritage area stories.
- Tennessee Civil War NHA has enhancing "heritage diversity" as one of its goals. They plan to accomplish this through educational programming. The Heritage Areas has developed a 13-point local self-assessment as a tool to increase capacity of local groups. Measures include: number of programs in education and growth in membership of local groups.

The following attendees are missing from the photos.

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Elizabeth Watson: Planning for Success

Elizabeth Watson completed her role as chief facilitator with the discussion session entitled *Planning for Success.* The group began with the following as discussion topics.

- More and more the Congressional Committees and the National Park Service (NPS) are asking for feasibility studies before National Heritage Area designation. The NPS Planning Office is developing guidelines for such studies based on generic bill language and NPS testimony. These will be out for review in the next month or so.
- How heritage areas come together, form partnerships, and get started planning for the future with the past is not well understood. Are there commonalities that can be identified?
- An effective management entity is critical to a successful heritage area. What management structures are most effective? How do we know?
- Management plans are required of most state and federal programs. How can the partners and public be involved in a meaningful way? How effective are plans in the success of an area?
- What professional skills are needed in developing a plan? Who should be involved?

We then tackled the question: how do we go about planning for success?

- The group identified decisions to be made:
  What is the role of the professional?
  How do we identify the boundary of the area to be evaluated.
  Is formal designation important and/or desirable? What are the costs, benefits, constraints of national designation?
  Can we necessarily know what is in the area? In some places distrust of government and concern about property rights makes even mapping assets problematic.
  Is measuring success about objective inventorying or about promotion?

Some Ingredients for Success were Identified

- Heritage areas should first assess capability to build successes. They may want to start with a trial project that has relatively low stakes as part of assessing capability.
- Heritage areas need a good management entity. What makes for a good heritage area management entity? It was suggested that all are equally ‘major league” whether federal and formal or looser. Success depends on staff. They are the bottom line. Heritage areas need to think horizontally not hierarchically.

Questions about Measuring Success were Raised

- Are we having fun?
  Does scale in a heritage area matter? Population? Land area?
  Does it need to have a fundamental story that people relate to?
  Does interpretation work consistently across the whole of the region?
  Does the heritage area work as a regional planning vehicle better than other regional planning constructs?

Measurements of Success were Suggested

- State heritage tourism, use of transportation monies, land use policy decisions, zoning law changes and decisions, and design of new construction could be used as measures of success.

- Measurements of marketing success could include:
  Number of Heritage area articles in national and local heritage publications.
  National Park Service branding. (Some though questioned if it was a good thing).
  Authenticity of ongoing commercial functions such as logging, food, crafts, and arts.
  Branding of the sort occurring in French national parks-the equivalent of copyrighted brands on everything produced within the park?

- Heritage area status becomes a positive factor in business location decisions.

- Economic data beyond the obvious indicators. For example, employment may be flat but skill levels improved. Wages may be stagnant, but measuring household incomes may show an increase.

  What measures do we need to have to sustain the National Heritage Area program?

  A measure of constituent satisfaction.
  Number of visitors and their impacts.
  Indicators of preferred retirement and/or business locations
  Measure of Local buy-in
  Correlation of interpretative approaches to visitor experience and length of stay

Standing front back and sideways Elizabeth Watson led an intent group through three vigorous discussion sessions.

Randy Mason: Summary-Where do we go from here?

Randy Mason, Director, Historic Preservation Department, School of Architecture, University of Maryland, led us in a wrap up session. The group was tasked to identify short and long-term steps to effect a heritage area research agenda. The proposed tasks are clumped under themes that recurred throughout the day.

1. Develop measures of heritage area health and indicators to measure success.

a. Share indicators already developed as basic performance measures.
b. Come up with a common set of measures that all National Heritage Areas and possibly others will subscribe to.
c. Collect some basic indicators in 2003 to be used as benchmarks in the National Park Service's 2005 budget
d. Create a livability index (measure of degree to which the environment supports our daily life) Develop through collaboration among current researchers
e. For Education: develop measures, collect data, and track effectiveness of Heritage Education initiatives; document field-based learning
f. Track sprawl and sustainability
g. Do baseline interviews; reinterview in 10 years

2. Provide a Series of Written and Electronic Publications

a. Produce report on progress by individual heritage areas to reach stated goals
b. Create short publication series on best practices: organize publication dates around key decisions and timeframes.
c. Expand the National Heritage Areas website and increase access among practitioners and researchers [www.cr.nps.gov/heritageareas]
d. Develop a national clearinghouse for heritage area research
e. Provide a GIS database of all Heritage Areas
f. Develop GIS-based maps with land areas noted
g. Develop template to do "life cycle" case studies
h. Create electronic heritage area journal to encourage research
i. Collect all plans and feasibility studies and put on web
j. Aim for major products for the 10th anniversary of the Omnibus Heritage Areas Bill in 2006

3. Develop and Nourish Heritage areas Partnerships and Collaborations

a. Participate in workshops and panels at conferences
b. Make basic connections at annual meetings e.g. AFS, AAA, OHA
c. Assemble federal agencies working in heritage areas and along scenic byways, the National Park Service and the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation.
d. Pull together key state agencies to provide "feedback loop" and to provide focus and ideas; make sure all are acquainted and connected.

4. Study Management Models

5. Create Training Opportunities

a. Create a PhD level internship program; place in Heritage Areas to undertake some of the research needed as well as assist.
b. Expand on Heritage Development Institute that exists as part of Alliance for National Heritage Areas

This report was compiled by Linda Seifert of the National Park Service, Philadelphia from notes taken by Suzanne Copping of the National Park Service's Washington Office and Angela Gernert from West Virginia University. The notes Elizabeth Watson captured on flip-charts were transcribed by Suzanne and are incorporated as well. All photos are by Linda Seifert.

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